

# RELIGION

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**The Religion Department of St. Olaf College seeks to enliven and deepen academic reflection on religion and theology in a liberal arts setting. We equip students of all backgrounds and traditions to interpret, evaluate, and respond to religious ideas and practices.**

Our work is shaped by the college's Lutheran heritage and commitments as these unfold in a world of many faiths. In teaching and scholarship, we take up the college's founding conviction that scholarly study of religion is basic to liberal arts learning. Through OLE Core curriculum courses and the religion major, we advance the college's goal of cultivating theological literacy. At the center of this work is scholarly study of the Bible and of Christian theology, understood as reasoned reflection on the meaning and truth of Christian faith. We also study Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, and regard the opportunities afforded by comparative study and religious dialogue as essential to our common goals of understanding religion and theology. Members of the department work with many religious traditions and areas of specialization, and all contribute to the college's OLE Core requirements in religion.

## Overview of the Major

Since the study of religion involves the use of a variety of methodologies and intersects with many other fields of study, students often find that a major in religion helps them integrate their work in other disciplines and develop a focus for their whole liberal arts education. Many students also choose to major in religion as a preparation for seminary or graduate work in religion.

## Intended Learning Outcomes for the Major

### Distinction

See Academic Honors

Religion majors may graduate with distinction if their grade point average is 3.5 in religion, and they submit a research project that meets the approval of a departmental review committee. The Junia Prize is usually awarded annually to the best distinction project of the year.

## Special Programs

The Religion Department participates in Language Across the Curriculum Program, which offers students the opportunity to use their world language skills in selected courses. Each year the department offers January term courses abroad, some carrying the OLE Core attribute Religion, Faith and Values.

## Recommendations for Graduate Study

The religion major offers excellent preparation in breadth and depth of study for graduate programs. We encourage students to take additional level III courses, religion seminars, independent studies,

and to develop competence in a world language. Distinction in religion is also recommended. Students should consult with their academic advisor and the religion department chair on specific programs and interests.

## Requirements

### Requirements for the Major

The religion major consists of eight courses (including no more than two level I courses) and requires both broad exposure to major approaches to studying religion and concentrated study in some aspect of religion. Majors complete one foundations course (REL 285 What is Religion? Approaches and Methods); two level III courses in intensive studies in religion; and at least one course from each of these areas: sacred texts, religious thought, historical and cultural studies, and second religious tradition.

Courses counting toward the major must include at least one course taught in the Religion Department that satisfies the OLE Core requirement Religion, Faith, and Values (RFV) and at least one course taught in the Religion Department that satisfies the OLE Core requirement Christian Theology in Dialogue (CTD).

Code	Title	Credits
<b>Foundations Course</b>		
REL 285	What is Religion? Approaches and Methods	1.00
<b>Courses that focus on three different dimensions of religion (and deal with at least two different religious traditions):</b>		
<b>Sacred texts</b>		<b>1.00</b>
REL 122	The Hebrew Bible: A Historical and Literary Approach	
REL 124	A Green Bible?	
REL 125	Ancient Texts, Modern Challenges: Engaging the Bible Today	
REL 221	Jesus in Scripture and Tradition	
REL 271	Bible in Context: Hist/ Geography/Culture in Israel & Palestine (abroad)	
REL 275	Religion and Empire in Greece and Turkey (study abroad)	
REL 276	The Ethics of Jesus	
REL 320	Interpreting Sacred Texts	
<b>Religious thought</b>		<b>1.00</b>
AS/RE 289	Buddhism, Peace and Justice	
REL 131	The Secular: Life without Religion?	
REL 202	Classics and Moderns	
REL 207	Christian Theology and the Moral Life	
REL 208	Christian Theology and Human Existence	
REL 209	Introduction to Feminist Theology	
REL 217	Christian and Islamic Ethics: Conflicts and Cross-Pollination	

REL 218	Political and Liberation Theology
REL 225	God, Evil, and Human Suffering
REL 227	Moses and Jesus: Jews and Christians in Dialogue
REL 236	How to Make a Life
REL 239	Beyond Narnia: The Theology of C. S. Lewis
REL 244	Theology after the Death of God
REL 245	Theology of Religions & Interreligious Dialogue
REL 252	Religion, Violence, and Peace
REL 254	Theology in Comparative Perspective
REL 263	Roman Catholic Theology
REL 267	African American Religious Thought in the 20th Century
REL 268	The Ethics of War
REL 293	Religious Pluralism and the Nature of Community
REL 296	Love, Justice and Social Relations
REL 302	History of Christian Thought I
REL 303	History of Christian Thought II
REL 304	History of Christian Thought III
REL 344	Feminist Perspectives and Christian Ethics
<b>Historical and cultural studies 1.00</b>	
AS/RE 254	Jesus on the Indian Road: A Perspective on Christianity
AS/RE 256	Religions of China, Korea, and Japan
REL 126	God at the Movies: Religion and Film
REL 141	Money & Magic: A History of Gifts, Capital, and Rituals of Exchange
REL 142	Heroes, Villains, and Christianity
REL 212	Christian Theology in Historical Context
REL 213	Lutheran Heritage
REL 214	Reformation Theology
REL 238	Tolkien and Theology
REL 243	Living Faith: Theology and Practice at Holden Village (study away)
REL 246	Islam -- Religion and Community
REL 248	Judaism
REL 260	Religion in America
REL 262	Reformations in Germany and Spain (study abroad)
REL 267	African American Religious Thought in the 20th Century

REL 275	Religion and Empire in Greece and Turkey (study abroad)
REL 280	Religion and Literature
REL 293	Religious Pluralism and the Nature of Community
<b>Second religious tradition (cannot be a course that carries Christian Theology in Dialogue OLE Core attribute) 1.00</b>	
AS/RE 256	Religions of China, Korea, and Japan
AS/RE 257	Buddhism
AS/RE 289	Buddhism, Peace and Justice
REL 120	Jews in the World of Islam
REL 133	Buddhist Meditation Traditions
REL 217	Christian and Islamic Ethics: Conflicts and Cross-Pollination
REL 246	Islam -- Religion and Community
REL 248	Judaism
<b>Select two level III intensive studies in religion courses (at least one must be a seminar): 2.00</b>	
REL 302	History of Christian Thought I
REL 303	History of Christian Thought II
REL 304	History of Christian Thought III
REL 320	Interpreting Sacred Texts
REL 344	Feminist Perspectives and Christian Ethics
REL 390	History of Religions Seminar
REL 392	Studies in Religion Seminar
REL 398	Independent Research
<b>Elective course <sup>1</sup> 1.00</b>	
<b>Total Credits 8</b>	

<sup>1</sup> One RFV or CTD course taught outside of the Religion Department may be counted toward the major. FYS 120 may be considered for elective credit at the discretion of the department chair.

*\*By completing this major, the student also satisfies the OLE Core Writing in the Major requirement.*

## Courses

Religion courses satisfy a variety of OLE Core curriculum requirements. The department offers several options to complete the Religion, Faith and Values, Christian Theology in Dialogue, and Ethical Reasoning in Context requirements. Additional courses count towards requirements in Global Histories and Societies, Power and Race, and Creativity.

### **AS/RE 254: Jesus on the Indian Road: A Perspective on Christianity**

The Indian Church, which claims the apostle Thomas as its founder, is the "home base" for this historical exploration of Christianity from the apostolic age to the present. The course considers Christian teachings about God and Jesus, biblical interpretation, worship, response to social, political, and cultural practices through encounters between Indian Christians and other churches. The multiple religions of India, its colonial experience, and its contemporary society are essential context. Offered periodically.

**AS/RE 256: Religions of China, Korea, and Japan**

This course introduces the religious and philosophical traditions of China, Korea, and Japan: Confucianism, Chinese Taoism, Buddhism, Japanese Shinto, and the folk traditions. Students read classical texts such as Confucius' Analects, Zhuangzi, Taodejing, and Chan Buddhist texts, and analyze fundamental values and concepts such as Tao, yin/yang, and humaneness. Offered periodically.

**AS/RE 257: Buddhism**

This course studies the Buddhist view of the human predicament and its solution. Students examine the life of the Buddha, Buddhist scriptures, and the historical and philosophical development of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism in East and Southeast Asia. Offered periodically.

**AS/RE 289: Buddhism, Peace and Justice**

Students examine contemporary Buddhist moral teachings on social issues such as violence and peacemaking, human rights and social justice, and humanity and the environment. Coursework focuses on the writings of Vietnamese monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, Tibetan leader-in-exile Tenzin Gyatso (Fourteenth Dalai Lama), American ecologist Joanna Macy, and others. Students consider the moral paradigms of Christianity and Buddhism: Christ and the Bodhisattva. Offered annually.

**REL 110: Topics in Religion**

Students study how a particular religious tradition (or traditions) interacts with a specific topic. Topics vary, but possibilities include the environment, peace and violence, technology, or sexuality. The topic orients students to important questions about how the particular religious tradition understands and acts in the world, as well as debates about what counts as religion. May be repeated if the topic is different.

**REL 120: Jews in the World of Islam**

This course studies interactions between Jews and Muslims from their origins in antiquity to the present, focusing on the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and Central Asia. Students examine the influence of Islam in Jewish theology, philosophy, and literature; the social and cultural significance of Jews in Islamic societies; and the impact of colonialism, nationalism, and religious politics on Jewish-Muslim relations. Finally, students explore the legacy and evolution of Muslim-Jewish relations today.

**REL 122: The Hebrew Bible: A Historical and Literary Approach**

How did the Bible become "the Bible"? This course introduces students to the dynamic social, literary, and intellectual development of scriptural traditions that emerge as the Hebrew Bible and its further development into ancient Jewish literature, Christian Scriptures, and Rabbinic Judaism. The course emphasizes Scripture as a vital, unfolding notion in human culture, with particular attention to the Ancient Israelite and Jewish communities that produced them. Students encounter academic practices in the study of religious texts.

**REL 124: A Green Bible?**

How do biblical narratives tell the story of land, water, and creature alongside that of humans and how have Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities understood and applied these sacred texts? This course introduces eco-critical methods of biblical study to determine the ecological efficacy of the Bible. Students explore historical and contemporary ideological landscapes to analyze how the Bible has impacted variant environmental dispositions and practices. Also counts toward environmental studies major and concentration.

**REL 125: Ancient Texts, Modern Challenges: Engaging the Bible Today**

The Bible has been a catalyst for social transformation and a cudgel for repression, intersecting with racism, gender performance, sexuality, climate change, and religious violence. This course explores historical, literary, and ideological approaches to biblical interpretation, focused on how its messages and interpretations shape and are shaped by the worlds they inhabit. Sustained attention is given to readings of the Bible from historically marginalized communities (including Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Ecofeminist, Queer, and Jewish perspectives).

**REL 126: God at the Movies: Religion and Film**

This course addresses how religion - beliefs, practices, values, the ways it functions in society - is reflected in contemporary film. Religion addresses fundamental questions of human existence: Why are we here? How should we live? Why is there suffering and evil? What happens when we die? The course alternates between close readings of central religious texts which probe such questions (including the Jewish Scriptures, the New Testament, and later theologians and philosophers) and films that take up the questions, as well. While the central focus is on Christian and Jewish sources, the course also considers non-theistic perspectives. Through analysis and discussion of both text and film, students begin to form their own answers.

**REL 127: The Bible and Ecological Desire**

As humans, we long for fulfillment and rest. The satiation of these desires focuses on consuming material objects, no matter the environmental consequences. Yet, the biblical tradition calls us to recognize that we are ecological beings. From the way we produce food to the giftedness of the ecosystem, all life is interdependent. This course will attend to this focus, thinking about re-forming our desires through practicing a wholeness grounded in the transcendent gift of creation.

**REL 131: The Secular: Life without Religion?**

We now seem to live in a world with and without religion. This dimension of the world can be called the secular as a form of life, secularization as a social reality, and secularism as a perspective informing human ethics, politics, and life. Students consider how religion and the secular relate, their joint genesis in modern and ancient religious histories, and evaluate various proposals for their contemporary life together.

**REL 133: Buddhist Meditation Traditions**

Meditative practice lies at the heart of the Buddhist tradition. Students explore the theories and practices of meditation in the Buddhist traditions historically developed and practiced in India, China, Korea, and Japan. Through this course, students develop an in-depth understanding of the Buddha's teachings in association with the principles behind those meditative practices, the modern adaptations of these practices, as well as the relationship with the Buddhist teachings on well-being and spiritual happiness. Offered annually in the spring semester.

**REL 141: Money & Magic: A History of Gifts, Capital, and Rituals of Exchange**

In this course students engage in discussions that go beneath binary discourse centered on Marxism and neoliberalism by turning to underlying debates related to morality and money. Students think about how societies determine value and how value comes to be reflected in coin, currency, and capital. Students investigate symbolism, sacred affection, fictions, and civil religion and read texts in a variety of disciplines including religious studies, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, economic history, and cultural studies. Offered annually in the spring semester.

**REL 142: *Heroes, Villains, and Christianity***

The Christian tradition is replete with images of heroes and villains, human and beyond, in soaring redemption arcs and precipitous falls from glory. Students critically engage material inside and alongside religious communities by examining biblical texts, theological writings, art, comic books, and film. This course explores Christian depictions of human capacities, divine nature, evil, salvation, and hope, ideals that continue to shape broader cultural values and life.

**REL 165: *Religion and Science***

Are religion and science in conflict? They have experienced significant tensions yet they owe much to each other. This course introduces students to science and religion in the modern era and how they map out distinct territories. Students examine the mutual influence of science and religion in forming conceptions about what nature, fact, and belief are, and how these notions have changed. Students investigate topics such as the denial of science, human origins, and emergence.

**REL 202: *Classics and Moderns***

This course introduces the central matters for argument in Christian theology -- God and Christ -- through close reading and critical analysis of selected classic (pre-1700) and modern theological texts. Students focus on the reasons supporting classic Christian beliefs about God, Christ and related topics and on the modern theological criticism of those beliefs. Is it still possible to be a Christian in the beginning of the 21st century? Offered periodically.

**REL 205: *Blessed are the Happy? Virtue, Happiness, & Good Life in Christian Thought***

In this course students examine Christians' enduring concern over such matters as what happiness is; the role, if any, virtues play in the lives of Christians and their lives with God. Topics include the early church's response to Greek philosophy, interpretations of sin, Christ's humanity, and human flourishing. Students also examine how these theological conversations continue to shape modern reflection on what makes a person happy and a life well-lived. Offered periodically.

**REL 207: *Christian Theology and the Moral Life***

Examining essential Christian beliefs with special attention to their implications for the moral life, students in this course analyze the meaning and truth of Christian symbols and claims about God, Christ, creation, fall, providence, redemption, etc., and explore their bearing upon ethical perspectives and principles, moral character and community and societal institutions and practices. Readings include classical and contemporary Christian theological sources. Offered periodically.

**REL 208: *Christian Theology and Human Existence***

This course traces the significance of essential Christian theological doctrines (e.g., God, Christ, sin, salvation) for contemporary understandings of human beings and human behavior. Selected comparisons with alternative and/or complementary views of human nature (for example, philosophical, psychological, sociological, literary) are also included. Offered periodically.

**REL 209: *Introduction to Feminist Theology***

Students examine traditional Christian doctrines in light of feminist critiques and reformulations. The course focuses especially upon language and images of God, the person of Christ and the work of redemption and understandings of human nature. Students evaluate arguments for and against the compatibility of Christianity and feminism. Offered periodically.

**REL 212: *Christian Theology in Historical Context***

This course offers an overview of the development of Christian thought and practice in the ancient, medieval and modern periods and analyzes the way Christian beliefs have evolved in response to changing historical situations. Special consideration is given to how different theological perspectives have influenced the activities of religious communities and lives of notable individuals. Offered periodically.

**REL 213: *Lutheran Heritage***

Analyzing continuity and change within the Lutheran tradition, students consider Luther's theology and proposals for the reform of Catholicism and evaluate major reappraisals of Lutheran beliefs and practices that developed in response to new issues and social situations. Topics include Orthodoxy and Pietism, conservative and liberal responses to the Enlightenment, modern European Lutheranism and issues of particular importance to Lutheranism in Scandinavia, America, and developing countries. Offered periodically during January term.

**REL 214: *Reformation Theology***

Students analyze 16th-century reform movements in light of their theological and historical contexts and their significance for contemporary theology. The course focuses on contributions and lives of the major figures in the Protestant Reformations (e.g., Luther, Calvin, Zwingli) and the Roman Catholic Reform. Offered periodically.

**REL 215: *Gender and Judaism***

This course explores how gender has shaped Jewish texts, ideas, and practices in a variety of historical contexts. Students consider how Jewish thinkers have understood - and sometimes worked to change - how gender operates in Jewish life and thought. Students use these thinkers as models for exploring how to think about ethical and religious questions using resources from a tradition of thought that they both learn from and critique. Offered periodically during spring semester.

**REL 217: *Christian and Islamic Ethics: Conflicts and Cross-Pollination***

This course compares Christian and Islamic conceptions of the relationship between God and humanity, as foundations for thinking about moral excellence and obligation. It also considers and compares how theological commitments and methods in each religious tradition affect approaches to particular ethical issues such as sexuality, war, and politics. Students work with scripture, film, polemical literature, judicial texts, and theological texts. Offered periodically.

**REL 218: *Political and Liberation Theology***

This course examines the rise of political and liberation theology movements, the situations and issues to which they respond, theological formulations of political/liberation theologies, and the relationship of these theologies to traditional Christian doctrines. Special focus on the relationship between the theological and political, nature of Christology and redemption, images and role of God, and understandings of human nature. Offered periodically.

**REL 220: *Reading Our Origins: Genesis, God, and Human Nature***

This course introduces students to the theological interpretation of Genesis. Topics include history of the book's composition; its distinctive emphases and themes; the history of its interpretation and cultural influence, particularly on questions of human nature, sin, divine promise, and faith; and current issues (i.e., ecojustice, race, gender and sexuality, human identity and difference). Theoretical issues related to biblical authority and the role of the interpreter are also addressed. Offered periodically.



**REL 221: *Jesus in Scripture and Tradition***

This course explores the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ in major New Testament writings: the Gospels, the letters of Paul, Hebrews, Revelation. Students also examine the development of New Testament ideas about Christ in subsequent Christian tradition, both classical and contemporary. Offered annually.

**REL 225: *God, Evil, and Human Suffering***

How do evil and the suffering that accompanies it affect our sense of the meaning and value of human life? Do religious ideas -- such as the idea of an all-powerful and all-loving God, or the claim that Jesus died on the cross for human sins -- help address these challenges or make them worse? Students explore ways that Christians, Jews, and Muslims have attempted to respond to these questions using philosophical, theological, literary, and visual strategies, and they also examine critiques of religious perspectives. Offered periodically.

**REL 227: *Moses and Jesus: Jews and Christians in Dialogue***

This course explores the interaction between Jews, Christians, and their respective religions in historical and theological perspective. Students consider basic features of Jewish belief and practice, past and present views of Jews and Christians about each other's beliefs, impact of Christian attitudes toward the Jews on the formation and development of Christian doctrines, relation between Christian theology and anti-Semitism, and the possibilities for a new relationship between Christians and Jews. Offered periodically.

**REL 232: *The Insurgent Multiculturalism of Beloved Community***

Do multicultural church congregations foster the racial reconciliation found in the concept of Beloved Community made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr.? Or do they function to assimilate minority cultures into the dominant white American culture? In this course, students examine sociological and ethnographic evidence from Christian congregations involved in multicultural projects. They learn to read these projects as lived theological expressions and critically analyze them. Offered periodically.

**Prerequisites:** WRIT 120 or equivalent.

**REL 234: *Ecospirituality Learning from Place***

Ecospirituality asks how attention to distinct bioregions leads to a flourishing life. Amidst climate catastrophe, encountering wisdom across spiritual traditions helps students learn from place. This course focuses on Indigenous, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Spiritual-but-Not-Religious practices in rural and urban environments; amidst plains, forests, prairies; submerged in streams, bogs, and big water. While marrying region to practice, students use data collection, storytelling, ritual, hand arts, food, and music to reflect upon their own ecospirituality.

**REL 236: *How to Make a Life***

What does a life well lived look like? The course examines how a variety of traditions answer this question, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Utilitarianism, Nietzschean Individualism and Scientific Naturalism. Students explore how contemporary practitioners address issues such as work, race, sex, and the environment as dimensions of a life well lived. The class reflects on these competing visions and explores ways to navigate the conflicting ideals within today's global context. Offered periodically.

**REL 238: *Tolkien and Theology***

Nordic sagas and modern fantastic works pose important theological questions such as the nature of reality in fantasy, the Eucharist, honor, gift, the grotesque, evil, salvation in Christ, and life as a quest and pilgrimage. They also raise valuable problems about the relationship of Christian beliefs to cultural narratives. Students may read J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, G.K. Chesterton, and selected sagas, alongside theological writings. Offered periodically during January Term.

**REL 239: *Beyond Narnia: The Theology of C. S. Lewis***

This course introduces students to Christian theology through examination of selected works of C.S. Lewis. The course considers both Lewis's explicitly theological writings and his fictional works as resources for theological reflection. Offered periodically.

**REL 241: *Ecology, Justice & the Christian Tradition***

In this course students investigate the relationship between historical and emergent environmental decline and Christianity's scriptures, claims, traditions, and practices. Students explore how variant ecotheological perspectives address the intersectional realities of gender, race, and socio-economic status when responding to a number of contemporary environmental issues and whether Christianity might aid in the envisaging of future solutions. Offered annually.

**REL 243: *Living Faith: Theology and Practice at Holden Village (study away)***

This course examines how religious faith transforms the practices of personal and social life. Students explore the nature of Christian community and the connections between Christian theological beliefs and practices. Students participate in the life of Holden Village, an isolated Lutheran retreat center in the Cascade Mountains of Washington. Offered alternate years during January Term. Apply through Smith Center for Global Engagement.

**REL 244: *Theology after the Death of God***

The death of God refers to the absence or non-existence of God in a post-Christian world. What happens after God has exited the scene? Is there only nature, humanity, or nothing at all? Students evaluate the challenges that the death of God has for thinking about God, the meaning and purpose of Jesus in such conditions, as well as religious belief, reason, and the secular by reading classical and contemporary theological work on the death of Jesus and the death of God. Offered periodically.

**REL 245: *Theology of Religions & Interreligious Dialogue***

Christians and people of other faiths seek to be faithful to their own traditions and also to attend to each other's claims. This course examines ways Christians and other believers develop their doctrinal traditions in the context of religious pluralism. This course gives specific attention to Christian reflection on the doctrines of God, Christ, and salvation in relation to religious reflection by people of other faiths. Offered periodically.

**REL 246: *Islam -- Religion and Community***

Students examine the formation of Islamic traditions and institutions and their religious meaning, paying special attention to the dynamism and crises of Islam in the 19th and 20th centuries. Offered periodically.

**REL 247: Theology Between Christianity and Islam**

How similar or different is the conception of God that Christians and Muslims speak of, pray to, and worship? Christianity and Islam share scriptural and intellectual resources and complicated histories full of both cooperation and conflict. Exploring these topics, students analyze and compare theological emphases, reflect on how much similarity and difference there has been between the two traditions of reflection, and examine possibilities for future interaction. Offered annually in the spring semester.

**REL 248: Judaism**

This survey of the historical, cultural, and theological developments within Judaism pays special attention to major periods and themes in Jewish life and thought, as well as to contemporary Judaism. Also counts toward Middle Eastern studies concentration.

**Prerequisite:** Open to first-year students with permission of the instructor.

**REL 249: Anti-Racist Christian Theologies**

Students explore anti-racist theologies emerging out of the U.S. context. They investigate historical interactions between religion and race, the role of Christian theology and churches in supporting racial divisions, and how biblical and theological resources can be used to counter racism rather than perpetuate it. Students reflect upon life experiences that have shaped their understandings of race intersecting with religion. The majority of readings will be from authors who are Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color.

**REL 251: Comparative Mysticism**

In this course students study deeply the nature of religion itself, experiences of divine union, detachment from false realities, altered states of consciousness, creative scriptural interpretations, gendered differences among reports, and mysticism's role in world peace or world strife. Students study the mystics themselves from a variety of religious and secularist traditions (variously Hindu, Jewish, Indigenous, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Ecological). Reading and experiencing mindfully, practicing bodily, students engage their whole selves. Offered annually in the fall semester.

**Prerequisites:** Open to current first-year students under OLE Core; students under GE curriculum must have completed BTS-B.

**REL 252: Religion, Violence, and Peace**

This course examines the relationship between religion and violence across diverse global contexts. Students consider whether some dimensions of religion - monotheistic belief or rituals of sacrifice, for example - are more prone to produce violent conflict than others; explore debates over how to measure the power of religion vis-a-vis other drivers of behavior; and discuss ethical arguments about justified violence, suffering, and peace-building, focusing on how religious ideas and practices contribute to these debates. Offered periodically.

**REL 254: Theology in Comparative Perspective**

Comparative theology is the study and interpretation of one religion in conversation with the texts, symbols, and practices of other religious traditions. It aims to discover new theological insights from another or from one's own tradition. The readings for this course explore the nature of comparative theology as a method of doing theology, drawing upon both theoretical paradigms in the field and religious texts contributing to Christianity's dialogue with other movements and traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Judaism, Islam, Shinto, Confucianism, Taoism, Chinese Traditional Religion, African Diasporic Traditions, Wicca/Neo-Paganism, Indigenous religions and spiritualities, and New Religious Movements. Offered annually.

**REL 255: Beauty, Arts, and Religion**

Are the arts a distraction from or essential to being religious? This course examines how theologians, philosophers, and artists articulate a diversity of answers to this question. Doing so, the class examines ways to interpret the religious meaning and purpose of art. Students encounter different ideas about the value of beauty, the importance of creativity, the moral and cultural relevance of art, and whether art offers a revelation beyond the material world. Offered periodically.

**REL 260: Religion in America**

This course introduces students to the history of religion in America in the context of American culture, paying attention to the formal structures and to questions of what "being religious" has meant to Americans. The course considers the range of religious traditions in the U.S.A. while attending to the Christian majority and variety within it. The course focuses specifically on the experiences and contributions of women and minorities.

**REL 262: Reformations in Germany and Spain (study abroad)**

This course examines sixteenth century Christian reforms in Germany and Spain. Students visit significant religious, historical, and cultural sites associated with Protestant and Roman Catholic figures such as Martin Luther, Teresa of Avila, and Ignatius of Loyola. Students expand their understanding of Christian theology, and how Christian beliefs developed through conversation and contestation amidst rapid societal and political changes. Special attention is given to how these reforming movements impacted Jewish and Muslim communities. Offered periodically during January term.

**REL 263: Roman Catholic Theology**

Students consider the present situation and future prospects of Roman Catholic theology through an engagement with the figures and events that have most deeply shaped Catholic theology in the 20th and 21st centuries. The course also examines recent Catholic views on the central topics of Christian theology, God, Christ, salvation and the Church, and the relationship of these views to Protestant ideas about the same issues. Offered periodically.

**REL 267: African American Religious Thought in the 20th Century**

This course offers an intensive study of African American religious thought with particular emphasis on the 20th century. Structured thematically, the course covers: African religious roots; religious thought with particular emphasis on ideas of suffering, redemption, salvation, and liberation; the relation between Christianity and other religious traditions; and Afrocentrism and Black Nationalism as interpretive and critical lenses of African American religious experience.

**REL 268: The Ethics of War**

Can war ever be morally justified? If so, what are the criteria for determining war's just initiation, just conduct and just termination? Students consider topics from a range of normative perspectives in a variety of religious and secular expressions (possible examples: principled and pragmatic pacifism, just-war theory, realism, crusader ethics, utilitarianism, Kantianism, communitarianism, natural law theory, rights theory). Offered periodically in spring semester.

**REL 271: Bible in Context: Hist/Geography/Culture in Israel & Palestine (abroad)**

This course studies the historical, geographical, and cultural background of Judaism and Christianity, focusing on major biblical sites in the Holy Land. Through the intersection of textual study, archaeology, and history, students explore biblical events from the time of Israel's ancestors to Jesus and the early church in, for example, Jerusalem, Galilee, and Jordan. The course also examines the history of conflict among Jews, Christians, and Muslims over the meaning and possession of the land. Offered alternate years during January term.

**REL 272: Sacred Places in Greece and Turkey (study abroad)**

This course explores the notion of sacred places and examines specific sites sacred to ancient people, Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Students visit both natural landscapes and constructed sites and attend to places' physical characteristics and history, ongoing human interaction, inter-religious dynamics, scholarly theory, and their own lived experiences of place. The interplay of religion, social life, and political power within sacred spaces provides additional thematic focus. Offered periodically during January Term. Apply through Smith Center for Global Engagement. Also counts toward ancient studies major.

**REL 275: Religion and Empire in Greece and Turkey (study abroad)**

This course studies the New Testament in light of its cultural, political, and religious contexts, focusing on the intersection of religion and empire. Visiting archaeological and cultural sites throughout Greece and Turkey enable students to explore how early Christians diversely navigate imperial pressures and challenges. Secondary areas of study will include the intersection of religion and empire in ancient Greece and Rome, Byzantium, the Ottoman empire, and modern Greece and Turkey. Offered periodically in January term. Apply through Smith Center for Global Engagement.

**REL 276: The Ethics of Jesus**

This course examines the ethical teachings of Jesus as found in the canonical Gospels (with special focus on the Sermon on the Mount), explores how these teachings have been understood at some major moments in Western history, and brings them to bear on the task of contemporary ethical reflection. Issues examined include, for example, non-violence, social and economic justice, sexuality, and ethnic conflict. Offered periodically.

**REL 280: Religion and Literature**

Students explore the religious significance of selected works of literature and examine how literary plot, character, symbolism, and theme raise religious questions, reveal ethical concerns and imply theological convictions. Offered periodically.

**REL 285: What is Religion? Approaches and Methods**

A study of competing and complementary approaches to the study of religion prevalent in the contemporary academy, this course prepares sophomore and junior religion majors for more advanced research seminars. Paying attention to the emphases and presuppositions of each approach, students develop an improved ability to understand the way that these different approaches affect scholarship and contribute to agreements and disagreements about what religion is and should be. Offered annually.

**REL 291: Holding Ethics Accountable**

Modern moral philosophy purports to tell us something about an unethical world - this course explores the gap between the ways that ethics has been discussed in the western philosophical tradition and its persistent failure to account for race, gender, religion, and disability in sensitive ways. Students are introduced to key concepts in moral philosophy and religious studies and use these concepts to consider whether and how modern ethics is worth salvaging.

**REL 293: Religious Pluralism and the Nature of Community**

Communities experience rich and complex kinds of religious diversity and pluralism. Students examine instances of ways for communities to live together successfully such as the practices of religious tolerance, dialogue, separating politics from religion, among other approaches. Students consider the effect of religious plurality on religious and non-religious communities. Offered periodically.

**REL 294: Academic Internship****REL 296: Love, Justice and Social Relations**

This course examines theological and ethical aspects of Christian social responsibility. It examines the meaning and normative import of Christian faith for justice and love in relational spheres (politics, economics, marriage and family, gender relations). It also explores the ethical implications of central Christian doctrines (vocation, sin, grace, two kingdoms, creation). Issues raised include civil disobedience, use of lethal force, distributive justice, love and self-sacrifice, and gender roles. Offered periodically.

**REL 298: Independent Study****REL 302: History of Christian Thought I**

Students critically analyze the development of Christian thought from its beginnings to the 9th century. Special attention is placed on the theological controversies which led to the formation of the Christian community's central doctrines: God as Trinity, Jesus Christ as divine and human, salvation as divine action and human response. Students read from Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, and others. Offered periodically.

**REL 303: History of Christian Thought II**

This course provides a critical analysis of the development of Christian thought in the Middle Ages and Reformation, 11th through 16th centuries. Particular attention is paid to the great theological systems of the Middle Ages and to the theological aims of the 16th-century reforming movements, drawing upon readings from Anselm, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Luther, Calvin, and others. Offered periodically.

**REL 304: History of Christian Thought III**

This course offers a critical analysis of the development of Christian thought in the modern period, 17th century to 1970. Students pay special attention to the rise of modern historical and philosophical outlooks that challenge traditional Christian claims and to the appropriation and criticism of these outlooks in modern theology. Students read from Edwards, Schleiermacher, Barth, Bultmann, and others. Offered periodically.

**REL 320: Interpreting Sacred Texts**

Careful study of selected sacred texts provides students with the opportunity to learn and use various tools and methods of interpretation. Students increase their understanding of the origins, structure, use and interpretation of sacred texts in various religious communities. Specific texts and traditions vary. Students may repeat the course with different primary texts. Offered periodically.

REL 344: Feminist Perspectives and Christian Ethics

How might the Christian ethical systems that have dominated western culture look different if women's experiences and perspectives had been more centrally included? This course focuses on the continuities and contrasts between traditional Jewish and Christian ethics and the feminist and womanist ethical challenges to them which have emerged over the last quarter century. Offered periodically.

Level III Seminars for Majors

REL 390: History of Religions Seminar

May be repeated if topic is different.

REL 392: Studies in Religion Seminar

May be repeated if topic is different. May count toward ancient studies and medieval studies majors.

REL 394: Academic Internship

REL 396: Directed Undergraduate Research

This course provides a comprehensive research opportunity, including an introduction to relevant background material, technical instruction, identification of a meaningful project, and data collection. The topic is determined by the faculty member in charge of the course and may relate to their research interests. Offered based on department decision. May be offered as a 1.00 credit course or .50 credit course.

Prerequisite: determined by individual instructor.

REL 398: Independent Research

Plan of Study  
Religion Major - Plan of Study

This is a sample plan that meets the prescribed requirements for the Religion major at St. Olaf. This tool is meant as a guide and does not replace working closely with the student's academic advisor.

An overview of general options for planning the religion major, including the major may be found here.

Course	Title	Credits
<b>First Year</b>		
<b>Fall Semester</b>		
FYS 120 or WRIT 120	First-Year Seminar (or Conversation Program) or Writing and Rhetoric	1.00
World Language		1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>2</b>
<b>January Term</b>		
REL 110	Topics in Religion	1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>Spring Semester</b>		
REL 110	Topics in Religion (if not taken previously)	1.00
WRIT 120 or FYS 120	Writing and Rhetoric (or Conversation Program) or First-Year Seminar	1.00
World Language		1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>3</b>
<b>Sophomore Year</b>		
<b>Fall Semester</b>		
REL Course (with CTD OLE Core)		1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>January Term</b>		
REL Elective Course		1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>Spring Semester</b>		
REL 285	What is Religion? Approaches and Methods	1.00

Religious Thought Elective Course		1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>2</b>
<b>Junior Year</b>		
<b>Fall Semester</b>		
Historical and Cultural Studies Elective Course		1.00
Religious Tradition Elective Course (cannot carry CTD OLE Core)		1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>2</b>
<b>Spring Semester</b>		
REL 285	What is Religion? Approaches and Methods (if not taken previously)	1.00
Sacred Texts Elective Course		1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>2</b>
<b>Senior Year</b>		
<b>Fall Semester</b>		
REL 300-level Seminar Course		1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>Spring Semester</b>		
REL 300-level Elective Course		1.00
<b>Credits</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>Total Credits</b>		<b>16</b>

Students must successfully complete the equivalent of 35 St. Olaf credits through a combination of full-credit and fractional-credit courses to earn the Bachelor of Arts.

Visit the religion webpage for more information.

Faculty

Chair, 2025-2026

Jason J. Ripley

Associate Professor of Religion  
Biblical theology; Gospel of John; imperial; gender; postcolonial interpretation

Anthony Bateza

Associate Professor of Religion  
Reformation studies

James S. Hanson

Associate Professor of Religion  
New Testament

Kiara Jorgenson

Associate Professor of Environmental Studies and Religion

Peder J. Jothén

Associate Professor of Practice in Religion  
religious ethics

Timothy Rainey

Assistant Professor of Religion

Edmund N. Santurri

Professor of Religion and Philosophy  
ethics; philosophical theology

Jamie A. Schillinger

Associate Professor of Religion  
Christian thought and ethics; Islamic thought and ethics

Dana Scopatz

Assistant Professor of Religion



**Kelly Sherman-Conroy**

Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion

**Gregory A. Walter**

Professor of Religion; Harold Ditmanson Distinguished Professor of Religion  
theology

**Charles A. Wilson**

Professor of Religion  
theology

**Sungha Yun**

Assistant Professor of Religion and Asian Studies

**Sarah Zager**

Assistant Professor of Religion

**Patricia (Trish) Zimmerman**

Associate Professor of Practice in Religion  
Christian mysticism; history of Christianity; women and religions